

**What would enslaved men hope to gain by fighting on the side of the revolutionaries for a liberty that was not conceived to include them?**

**What effects did revolutionary service on either side, revolutionary of British, have on the subsequent lives of men of color who were enslaved at the outset of the conflict, and the subsequent lives of their families?**

Why did men of color—enslaved or free—fight in the American Revolution? There is some evidence, at least, to indicate that enslaved men hoped to gain their freedom. Although the records are not always clear on the matter, some slaves were able to parley terms of military service in exchange for their manumission. Other enslaved men took matters into their own hands. Edom London ran away from his owner and served for eight months in the Continental Army in 1775. Richard Hobby, a slave owned by Jonathan Hobby of Concord, enlisted in the army in 1781 without his owner's permission. When Jonathan appeared at camp hoping to retrieve his wayward servant, army officers privileged Richard's status as a soldier over his former servitude and the angry master left empty-handed.<sup>1</sup>

If they could gain their freedom through service, enslaved men stood to receive an immense economic gain in return for their enlistment. The Continental Congress and Massachusetts governments both offered potential soldiers substantial bounties to join the army, and local towns and recruitment committees enticed men with even higher payments. And once they had completed their enlistment, Congress promised to reward faithful soldiers with one hundred acres of land. These benefits would have been attractive to free men of color, who would have had no way to predict how the fragile post-war economy would rob these promises of their value.<sup>2</sup>

Additionally, Massachusetts slaves may have been motivated to join the Revolutionary armies for the same ideological reasons as their white counterparts. Enslaved men of color in Massachusetts were certainly exposed to the republican rhetoric of liberty and freedom that abounded during the period. Additionally, the era of the America Revolution saw the growth of a strong anti-slavery sentiment in Massachusetts—a sentiment that had been germinating throughout the course of the eighteenth century. Its origins lay in the religious ethos instilled in the colony by its Puritan founders and the first seeds appeared as early as 1700, when Judge Samuel Sewall published the anti-slavery tract *The Selling of Joseph*. In this publication--the first pamphlet in North America to condemn slavery and the slave trade--Sewall attacked traditional religious justifications for slavery, claiming that "Man-stealing" and enforced servitude were

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<sup>1</sup> For motivations of American soldiers during the Revolutionary War, see Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). For Edom London, see George Quintal, jr., *Patriots of Color: "A Peculiar Beauty and Merit." African Americans and Native Americans at Battle Road & Bunker Hill* (Boston: Government Printing Office, 2004), pp 155-157. For Richard Hobby, see entry for Richard Hobby, *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors of the Revolutionary War* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1932), v. 8, p. 21; "Proceedings of a Court of Inquiry," February 3, 1783, Papers of George Washington, Series 4: General Correspondence, 1697-1799, Library of Congress; David Humphreys to Jonathan Hobby, Newburgh, February 7, 1783, Washington Papers, Series 4, LoC.

<sup>2</sup> For more on Continental soldiers in the post-war world, see John Resche, *Suffering Soldiers: Revolutionary War Veterans, Moral Sentiment, and Political Culture in the Early Republic* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).

sins. Because black men and women were “the Offspring of God; they ought to be treated with Respect agreeable.” Religious themes such as these continued to appear in Massachusetts anti-slavery rhetoric throughout the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup>

By 1773, however, a parallel thread had achieved dominance in the colony’s anti-slavery rhetoric. Combining the trans-Atlantic concept of “British Liberty” that touted the right to self-government, local autonomy, and individual freedom with the Age of Reason’s reverence for scientific rationality, slavery’s opponents began offering a humanitarian argument against the institution. In 1764, colonial radical James Otis published *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved*, in which he argued that slavery was repugnant to the natural order of the world. Otis stated simply “the colonists are by the law of nature freeborn, as indeed all men are, white or black.” For Otis, this was the logical extension of the thought process that the Massachusetts orator had developed to defend his stance against arbitrary taxation and what was perceived as a corrupt Parliamentary system. While his argument drew on the religious arguments influencing almost a century of debate over New England slavery in New England, Otis also combined elements from the political philosophy of Locke, Machiavelli, and Harrington into a uniquely republican anti-slavery thesis.<sup>4</sup>

Slaves were certainly aware of these ideological trends. In Boston, where enslaved men like Pompey Fleet worked in print shops and often delivered the newspapers, blacks were no doubt exposed to the pamphlet wars and editorial debates that dominated the town’s print culture during the 1760s and 1770s. Men of color employed both religious and republican arguments to attack their status as chattel slaves. In a January 1773 petition to the Massachusetts legislature, for example, enslaved men implored colonial officials to abolish slavery because it forced them into a “degraded contemptuous Life” and prevented their efforts to “keep all [God’s] Commandments.” And in June 1773, a group of slaves began a petition to the legislature by stating their belief that all men of color “have in Comon with other men a naturel right to be free and without molestation to injoy such Property as thay may acquire.” And African men had little trouble translating these shared ideologies into military spirit: in March 1780, a group of African men reminded the state legislature that “many of our Colour... have Cheerfully Entered the field of Battle in the defence of the Common Caus.”<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of why they joined the army, military service offered men of color a chance to refashion their social standing. People of color in Massachusetts benefited from a colonial military tradition that efficiently and readily recruited soldiers for war and made little distinction for racial or ethnic origins.. The Revolutionary War’s insatiable manpower demands meant that black soldiers joined the Continental Army’s ranks in unprecedented numbers. By joining Revolutionary armies, black men transformed themselves from slaves into soldiers. This

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<sup>3</sup> Mark A. Peterson, “The Selling of Joseph: Bostonians, Antislavery, and the Protestant International, 1689-1733,” *Massachusetts Historical Review*, vol. 4, Race & Slavery (2002), pp. 1-22.

<sup>4</sup> For James Otis, see T.H. Breen, “Subjecthood and Citizenship: The Context of James Otis’s Radical Critique of John Locke,” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 71, No. 3 (Sept. 1993), pp. 378-403.

<sup>5</sup> The petitions are reprinted in: Herbert M. Aptheker, *A Documentary History of the Negro People in the United States* (New York: Citadel Press, 1963-64). For an analysis of these petitions, see Thomas J. Davis, “Emancipation Rhetoric, Natural Rights, and Revolutionary New England: A Note on Four Black Petitions in Massachusetts, 1773-1777,” *The New England Quarterly*, Vol. 62, No. 2 (June 1989), pp. 248-263.

transformation allowed them to join a military community that, at least officially, promised them equal status with their white counterparts. Black soldiers received the same bounties, wages, and rewards as did all other soldiers. Black and white soldiers shared food, tents, and clothing as well as privation and hardship during the harsh winters at Valley Forge and Morristown. Through these shared experiences, soldiers developed a common bond that transcended racial lines.

Outside the army, the various strands of Massachusetts anti-slavery rhetoric came to a climax in the 1780s. The constitution Massachusetts adopted in 1780 began with the phrase, “All men are born free and equal.” By 1783, a series of court rulings had determined that slavery violated this promise of equal rights. Perhaps the most famous of these “freedom cases” is the Quock Walker case. Walker, a thirty-year-old enslaved man living in Worcester County, brought suit against his owner, Nathaniel Jeninson, in a series of court cases that culminated in a September 1781 decision “that Quork is a Freeman and not the proper Negro slave” of Jennison. At almost the same time, Brom, an enslaved man and Bett, an enslaved woman, obtained a similar judgment against their owner, Colonel John Ashley of Berkshire County. Historians generally credit these two court cases with the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts.<sup>6</sup>

But slavery in Massachusetts did not simply disappear after these two “freedom cases.” In general, the Massachusetts government adopted a hands-off approach to ending slavery within the state. Between 1780 and 1804, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania all passed gradual emancipation laws aimed at eliminating slavery. Not so in Massachusetts--the only action taken by the state legislature with regard to slavery was a 1787 law prohibiting the slave trade. Instead, when and how slavery came to an end was left to individual slaves and their former owners. Some slaves were certainly aware of the court decisions that had declared slavery incompatible with the new constitution and used it to their advantage. In 1786, for example, the Boston Selectmen debated how to provide support for “a Negro Man,” formerly belonging to Mr. Gray of Boston, “who took his freedom” sometime in 1786. But even though census takers recorded no slaves in Massachusetts during the first federal enumeration in 1790, a vast number of people of color were living with white families. Many people seem to have continued living in the same manner as before the Revolution, now slaves in everything but name. Runaway advertisements continued to appear sporadically in New England newspapers and enslaved people of color continued to appear in Massachusetts wills—although described with increasing frequency as indentured servants.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The range of literature on Massachusetts slave cases focuses almost exclusively on the Quock Walker cases, 1780-1783 and Mum Bett’s case in 1781. For a survey of these two cases, see Arthur Zilversmit, “Quock Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Oct. 1968), pp. 614-624. For an example of the prominence ascribed to these legal cases (and the Quock Walker case in particular) in abolishing slavery in Massachusetts, see the slavery and emancipation timeline in David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. xii.

<sup>7</sup> For the 1787 Massachusetts act to prevent the slave trade, see “An Act to prevent the slave trade, and for granting relief to the families of such unhappy persons as may be kidnapped or decoyed away from this Commonwealth.” *Acts and Laws of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 1786-1787* (Boston, 1893), p. 615. For an example of post-1783 runaway advertisements, see *Massachusetts Spy*, April 28, 1785. For examples of people of color appearing as indentured servants, see indenture between David Stoddard Greenough and Dick Morey, Roxbury, September 5, 1786, David Stoddard Greenough Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society and inventory of the estate of Gardiner Greene, 1832, Docket #30090, Suffolk County Probate File Papers, Judicial Archives of Massachusetts, Massachusetts Archives.

Soldiers of color returning to Massachusetts at the close of the Revolutionary War were thrust into this nebulous position within the state's social hierarchy. Although legally no longer slaves, people of color often found themselves with little or nothing to use in support of their livelihoods. Many drew on their military experiences to establish new networks and communities, such as Brister Freeman and Charlestown Edes, veterans and former slaves who jointly purchased an acre of land in Concord's Walden Woods in 1797. Many men of color also maintained deep connections with the white men they had served alongside in the Continental Army. Particularly striking examples are found in black veterans' nineteenth-century pension applications. Beginning in 1818, the federal government began requiring old soldiers to obtain affidavits from former officers or other soldiers attesting to their identity and to their faithful service. Hundreds of white soldiers sought out men of color who could attest to their service, in some cases travelling hundreds of miles in order to obtain their affidavits. As part of his 1818 pension application, Joseph Wright, a former private in the 6<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Regiment living in upstate New York, tracked down his old comrade, a man of color named Cato Howe, then living some two hundred and sixty miles away in Plymouth, Massachusetts. Howe testified that he remembered White from their service together and "well new him to Be a Faithfull good Solder." That a white man like Wright would go to such extraordinary lengths to obtain Howe's testimony suggests that the two had developed a strong bond during their mutual service and may have remained in touch with each other in the post-war decades.<sup>8</sup>

Although in Massachusetts, freedom often meant hardship and marginalization, this should not overshadow the incredible changes the Revolution wrought on the institution of slavery in the state. A multifaceted anti-slavery sentiment had slowly taken root in eighteenth-century Massachusetts. Reaching its culmination during the American Revolution, this sentiment manifested itself in colonial pamphlet literature and in legal decisions declaring slaves to be free. But Massachusetts slaves enlisted in Revolutionary armies far more often than they appeared in colonial courts or in the pages of Boston's print culture. The army brought the statistically marginalized population of Massachusetts enslaved people into contact with a wider world, offering them an opportunity to engage with concepts and experiences previously unknown to them. It also meant that white Massachusetts soldiers—many for the first time in their lives—spent a considerable amount of time fraternizing with black soldiers. While this did not transform Revolutionary war into an anti-slavery crusade, it did facilitate the creation of a shared identity amongst Continental soldiers as individuals who could lay claim to participation in the securing of independence and the creation of the republic. Black and white soldiers alike brought this shared identity home with them at war's end where, once combined with a growing anti-slavery sentiment, proved to be the hinge on which "publick opinion" against slavery turned. And although it died a troubled death, the changes set in motion by the Revolution helped ensure that slavery would not endure as an institution in nineteenth-century Massachusetts.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Pension File of Joseph Wright S45468, Reel 1874, *Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty Land Warrant Application Files*, Microfilm Publication M804, National Archives, Washington DC.

<sup>9</sup> For anti-slavery pamphlet literature in the eighteenth century, see Samuel Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph: A Memorial* (Boston, 1700) and James Otis, *The Rights of the British Colonies Asserted and Proved* (Boston, 1764). A fairly comprehensive list of court cases involving enslaved men and women can be found in: A comprehensive list of court cases involving Massachusetts slaves can be found in Emily Blanck, "Seventeen Eighty-Three: The Turning Point in the Law of Slavery and Freedom in Massachusetts," *The New England Quarterly* 75, No. 1 (March 2002):

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24-51. For background on the relationship between race, slavery, and abolition in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Massachusetts, see: Joanne Pope Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998) and Margot Minardi, *Making Slavery History: Abolitionism and the Politics of Memory in Massachusetts* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

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